

## catacombs

Catacomb (from the Greek kata kumbas, meaning "near the low place or ravine"), originally the name of a particular district in Rome, later referred to the subterranean BURIAL places for Christians in the Roman Empire. Catacombs have been found in Anatolia, Malta, and North Africa, and in the cities of Naples, Paris, Syracuse, and Trier, Germany. However, the principal catacombs, about 40 in number, are in Rome. Found mainly along the Via Appia, the Via Ostiensis, the Via Labicana, the Via Tiburtina, and the Via Nomentana, they bear 4th-century names that identify the martyrs believed to have been buried in them.

Unlike the Romans, the Christians did not practice CREMATION because of their belief in the resurrection of the dead. In keeping with the Roman proscription against burial within the city limits, the early Christians in Rome used pagan burial places outside the city walls as cemeteries (from a Greek word meaning "place of rest"). Early burial was either in simple graves marked to preserve the memory of Christian martyrs or in the vaults of noble families sympathetic to the Christians. The construction of catacombs began in the 2d century; they were initially used both for interment of the dead and for memorial services. By the 5th century, they were no longer used for burial, but exclusively for religious services commemorating the death of a martyr. Catacombs subsequently fell into disuse.

No evidence exists that the practice of underground burial was an invention of the Christians, nor that the catacombs were used primarily as places of refuge. The orderly, reverential manner of Christian interment in catacombs is reminiscent of the earlier ETRUSCAN practice of burial in underground tomb chambers, and the celebration of memorial services was in keeping with the customs of Roman society. The move from ground-level burial sites to subterranean burial places was caused by the need for more space. The Christians excavated a vast system of galleries and linking passages, one beneath the other, joined by narrow, steep steps frequently descending as many as four stories. These passages measured about 2.5 m (8 ft) high and less than 1 m (3 ft) wide. Niches 40 to 60 cm (16 to 24 in) high and 120 to 150 cm (47 to 59 in) long were cut in the walls of soft tufa rock. The bodies were placed in these niches or in stone SARCOPHAGI, fully clothed and bound in fine linen. Lime or spiced ointments were used to offset putrefaction. Individual graves were sealed with a slab bearing the name and age of the deceased, the date of death, and a religious inscription or symbol.

These inscriptions and symbols, along with decorations on walls, arches, and sarcophagi in the catacombs, provide a rich source of information about Early Christian art and prayer. The decorative motifs were frequently adopted from Roman art. Subjects for Christian paintings were usually taken from the Bible, though occasionally they came from secular sources. Christ is generally depicted either as the Good Shepherd or as the Greek mythological character ORPHEUS. New Testament miracles are also portrayed, but not the Crucifixion or the Resurrection. Small lamps used for lighting the passages and burial sites in the catacombs were adorned with Christian symbols such as the cross, the dove, the Christogram or Chi-Rho symbol, the fish, and loaves. Prayers for the departed, for the newly baptized, and for courage and perseverance under trial appear frequently.

After AD 313, when Christianity was established as an official religion, the practice of subterranean burial gradually declined. It became customary to use aboveground cemeteries in and around church buildings. Some evidence has been found that devastation committed by barbarian invaders extended to the catacombs, further contributing to their disuse.

The catacombs seem to have been completely abandoned by the 9th century and their existence was largely forgotten. Many of the RELICS of martyrs were transferred to churches and basilicas. The existence of the catacombs remained unknown throughout the Middle Ages; they were not rediscovered until 1578. Interest in them was renewed, mainly through the publication of several major works that undertook a systematic study of early Christian times.

Agnes Cunningham

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See also: EARLY CHRISTIAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE.

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Other countries have been successful in developing a national strategy for the promotion of the role of the private sector in the economy. In the case of the Dominican Republic, the private sector has been largely ignored in the development process. The government has been reluctant to involve the private sector in the development process, and the private sector has been largely ignored in the development process. The government has been reluctant to involve the private sector in the development process, and the private sector has been largely ignored in the development process.

Unlike the Dominican Republic, the United States did not have a national strategy for the promotion of the role of the private sector in the economy. The government has been reluctant to involve the private sector in the development process, and the private sector has been largely ignored in the development process. The government has been reluctant to involve the private sector in the development process, and the private sector has been largely ignored in the development process.

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